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herausgegeben von:  
Christian Rätsch  
John R. Baker



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GIORGIO SAMORINI

## **The Initiation Rite in the Bwiti Religion (Ndea Narizanga Sect, Gabon)\***

In the western regions of equatorial Africa the hallucinogen plant *Tabernanthe iboga* Baill. (Apocynaceae fam.) is used in rites from time immemorial to induce deep modifications of the state of consciousness, accompanied by visions, journeys of the soul in the "other world" and contacts with divine entities.

The Pigmy tribes living in the equatorial forest are the first and main holders of the knowledge of the psychoactive properties of this shrub. In Gabon, where the use of this plant—called *iboga* or *eboka* in the fang language—is particularly widespread, the knowledge and the rites associated with its use are sometimes referred to by the French terms "Religion de l'Iboga" or "Mystères de l'Iboga" where the term "Mysteries" is to be understood in its original meaning, according to the etymology which make it originate from the Greek work *mistes*, "The one who keeps his mouth shut", rather than in the more common meaning of "mysterious event".

Around the mid of the past century, the effort of conversion of Apindji, Mitsogho, Fang and other Gabon's population, made by the Catholic Missions originated a religious cult, based also on the use of *iboga*, in which the traditional and Christian values were joined and modified more and more, until this new cult was transformed into a true syncretic religion: Bwiti.

In the course of my personal studies on Bwiti and field research aiming at widening my knowledge of the use of *iboga* among these populations, I had the opportunity to participate in different Bwitist rites, in particular in the *ngoze* (Bwitist night 'masses') of Eastern, Annunciation, Assumption at a community belonging to the Ndea Narizanga (or Ndeya Na Dissanga) sect whose members live in Melen<sup>1</sup>, near Libreville<sup>2</sup>. Bwiti is differentiated in several sects, in continuous evolution and fragmentation, which differ above all as far as the degree of absorption of the Christian values and symbology is concerned. The Bwitist calendar is parallel to the Catholic one.

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Fig 1: Fang temple of the Bwitist sect Ndea Narizanga, at Bizango, near Libreville, Gabon.

Among the Fangs in Gabon—the population of the Bantu linguistic line who most transformed and “syncretised” the original cult of iboga—there are two main Bwitist rites: 1) the *ngoze*, or Bwitist ‘masses’, which are celebrated at night, for three nights in a row (from Thursday night to Saturday night), during which the members of the community take a ‘small’ dose of powdered root of iboga, then abandoning themselves to dancing and singing until dawn; 2) *tobe si*, the initiation rite celebrated each time an individual decides to join the religious community. In

this case the novice has to eat an enormous quantity of iboga root, equivalent to hundreds of doses similar to those eaten during the *ngoze*. It is a quantity which leads him/her progressively to a state of unconsciousness, of a long ‘coma’ during which his/her soul makes a “journey to the other world”, while his/her body stays laid out on the ground, guarded by the officiants of the community (SWIDERSKI, 1981). According to what Bwitists maintain, during the ‘great vision’ (*yen*) the soul of the novice contacts divine entities that enlighten him/her revealing the “roots of life”. Bwitists also affirm that everyone who joins one of their communities by undergoing the initiation rite discovers something, makes the greatest discovery he/she could make in his/her life.

In May 1993 I underwent *tobe si* at the community of Mélen and now this community acknowledges me as the first White man initiated by the Ndea Narizanga sect of the Fang Bwiti. Some White men, mostly French permanently living in Gabon, made themselves initiate in other Bwitist sects, particularly in Dissumba, the most widespread sect.

I refer those who are interested in the general aspects of the Bwiti religion to the bibliography at the end of the article and here I intend to draw the attention on the initiation rite, mainly using the more or less objective data of my personal experience as well as those gathered by my informers, in great part the officiants of the community, which now I belong to. Although the description of this African rite cannot have the function of pure source of ethnographical and anthropological data, the attempt of communicating my experience could yet be useful for those who are interested in “hallucinogens” and in the history of their relationship with man.





Fig. 2: Roots of *iboga* (*Tabernanthe iboga* Baill.) before being powdered to be used in the Bwitist rites.

As previously pointed out (SAMORINI, 1992), Bwiti is an exemplary case of 'psychedelic', or better, 'entheogenic' religion. It is a case whose importance seems not be adequately evaluated so far by western scholars of the multidisciplinary research on "hallucinogens" and this appears to me even more evident now, since I had the opportunity of experiencing the "great vision" as well as observing, even though in a limited way, the particular methods used to induce it.

Although the history of Bwiti covers the period of time over the past 150 years, the central nucleus of the *tobe si* rite is much older and, in spite of the Bwitist syncretisms and *interpretatio*, has arrived till the present time almost unchanged. In *tobe si* the novice is guided towards a particular way of taking iboga which starts a characteristic psychophysical reaction which has always been the same, sincerer centuries or, probably, thousands of years. The discovery of this particular way of taking iboga is to be ascribed, as already mentioned, to Pigmies who have been living in the deep equatorial forest for thousands of years. Still now these populations are the holders of the 'Mysteries of iboga', which are mainly based on the particular way of taking iboga which I am now about to describe. However, if Fangs con-



sider Bwiti a universal religion, hence approachable by anyone who seriously intends to join it, even a White person, among the Pigmy population the use of iboga, non syncretic but traditional, is still considered and kept secret. Field anthropologists and ethnographers seem to meet with strong opposition in this connection.

The "Religion of Iboga", both traditional and Bwitist, is a "mystery religion", characterised by a deep initiation revelation and by the prohibition of communicating details of the initiation rite, or, now among the Bwitist communities, some details of it. As *bandzi* (initiated person) I have, too, the obligation of maintaining this reserve, and it is also for this reason that the description of my experience will be limited and, in some parts, incomplete. The term *bandzi*, by which the initiated are called, derives from the verb *dzi*, "eat", and it means "the one who has eaten".

The ever increasing number of sects and the remarkable elasticity of interpretation of the Bwitist canon are the main cause of a good degree of heterogeneity inside Bwiti, and this favours the multiplicity of the symbolic and ritual differences which characterise the single religious sects and communities. Each charismatic chief of a community makes symbolic and aesthetic changes in the ceremonies according to his personal interpretation. This is reflected in the heterogeneity of the descriptions of the Bwitist ceremonies outlined so far by the researchers of Bwiti. I have not found any confirmation in the descriptions by the other Authors for several moments of the initiation rite, which I went through.

The Ndea Narizanga sect was founded in 1957 by Nzoé Nguéma Messoyé and originated from the Ndeya Kanga sect split. The latter originated from a split which occurred in 1935 in the Dissumba Bwiti (SWIDERSKI, 1971). The Ndea Narizanga sect is strongly syncretic with Christianity and has absorbed particularly the Christian and Marian symbolologies. Its rites appear to be less investigated by the researchers who dedicated to Bwiti so far. More precisely, only STANISLAW SWIDERSKI (1990-91, V:191) and JAMES FERNANDEZ (1966:45) show be aware of the existence of this sect.

## Preparations

The *tobe si* ('to sit on the ground', the initiation is called in this way in the Bwitist liturgical language *popé na popé*<sup>3</sup>) is preceded by a period of psychological preparation of the novice and by 'technical' preparations made by the community. The initiation of a person is always an important event inside the religious community, emotionally experienced as such by all its members.

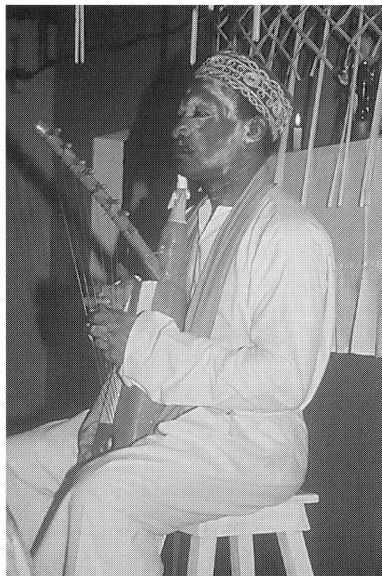


Fig. 3: Player of the sacred harp (ngombi) during the ngozé, the Bwitist mass.

Before the *tobe si* the novice (*étéma*) must abstain from sexual intercourse, wines and spirits and all exciting drugs (from coffee to the cola nut, widely used by the Fangs) for at least twenty days. The supreme *kombo*—The priest at the highest rank inside a community<sup>4</sup>—during a preparatory conversation, advised me to spend that period seeking isolation and silence, reaching the moment of the ‘great vision’ as *tranquil* as possible.

During one of the *ngozé* celebrated in the weeks preceding the initiation, the novice has to indicate publicly two initiated persons of the community—a man and a woman—whom he has freely chosen as ‘father’ (*taré*) and ‘mother’ (*nana*) of initiation. To be chosen as ‘parent’ of initiation is a great honour for a Bwitist, and the number of times that this role has been held influences the relationships of due respect and hierarchy inside the community. The ‘parents’ of initiation

are always with the novice, encouraging and comforting him in difficult and frightful moments he may experience while taking *iboga*. In practice, the initiation parents task is that of psychological assistance towards the novice, while the *kombo*, the real experts of *iboga*, ‘work’ on him/her to cause the ‘great vision’.

Assisted by his/her ‘parents’, the novice must bring, at his/her expenses, a large variety of foodstuff and particular objects, which he/she will present as offer to the community and which will be used during the rite. In the Ndea Narizanga sect the cult objects (*bissembé*) include: a white sheet, a mat, a hunt knife, two white dishes, two live chickens, a red parrot feather, a needle, a handkerchief, strong beverages and spirits.

Some days before the initiation the novice is taken near the site of the initiation, by a tree in the forest, under which he sits alone and in silence. The food for him/her is chosen by the *kombo* and rationed in quantities, which are gradually smaller, and from the day before the initiation he/she is put on complete fasting. In different Bwitist sects, before the initiation rite the novice must drink emetic beverages,

with the aim of emptying and purifying his/her stomach. This is not included in the liturgy of the Ndea Narizanga, with the exception of particular cases.

For each initiation the members of the community go to the place chosen for the rite—a Bwiti temple, *abeñ*—cleaned and adorned in the previous days. The most numerous communities have more temples, located in the native villages of the various family groups by which it is formed. Being the event exceptional—the first initiation of a White man—all the members of my community were present (approximately forty adults and twenty children). A village was chosen, which was isolated in the forest, abandoned since a long time and used for these occasions only.<sup>5</sup>

Starting from the night before the *tobe si* (Wednesday evening) all the members of the community take a ‘normal’ quantity of iboga (a coffee-spoon) and go on taking it, preferably at night, until the last day of the rite (Sunday). It is important that all present people set their minds in a modified state of consciousness as this is the most suitable way to ‘accompany’ the ‘big journey’ of the novice. Also children are given iboga; a symbolic quantity is put inside the mouth of babies. Many of the people, in particular the officiants, do not sleep intentionally during the whole initiation rite.

At midnight on Wednesday evening the novice is taken to the centre of the main room of temple, while the members of the community arrange themselves along the walls. With a particular ceremony the ‘father’ and the ‘mother’ of the novice present him/her to the assembly. Then some questions are addressed to the novice concerning the personal reasons, which pushed him/her to wish the initiation and he/she replies publicly. If these reasons are considered sufficient the chief of the community declares the acceptance of the new member and exhorts all members of the community to the collective effort and sacrifices required by the case. From that moment the novice is at their disposal: he/she is not allowed to move on his/her will, he/she has to do all he/she is ordered to do. The parrot feather (*asè kôs*) which he/she has brought among the offering objects (*bissembé*) is put on his/her forehead. Because of the parrot loquacity, its feather is considered a symbol of language and it is thought to facilitate the communication between the novice and the divine entities he/she will meet during the vision.

The following morning the novice, undressed, is covered with a white cloth, tied on the hips as a swaddling-band (the novice is preparing to ‘be born’ in a new life) and then he/her is taken into the forest. Here, retired with a member of the community, he/she confesses his/her sins. The confession (*ayebé*) concerns the whole life and is addressed to the spirits of the forest. This cathartic action, re-





*Fig. 4: Woman to be initiated, waiting to begin the eating of iboga.*

deeming from the personal sense of guilty, is highly considered by Bwitists: there can not be a good 'vision' without a good confession, even more, voluntarily hiding some sins is considered extremely dangerous and for some cases fatal.

Afterwards, through a tangled way in the forest, the novice is taken to different species of trees, chosen by the spirits as their fixed abode. Under each tree the novice is presented to the spirits, with a ceremonial accompanied with prayers and benedictions.

In the meanwhile, a group of women prepare the huge quantity of drug, which the novice shall eat. The iboga roots, pulled up at that moment or a little earlier, are cleaned, cut into large pieces that are then cut in smaller pieces; then the skin is removed and the white pulp is scraped off and put in a container. These fragments of root are then minced and made into dust. The women carry out all these operations as in an assembly line. Although the powder prepared in this way may be preserved for a long time, Bwitists prefer to prepare it when it is wet for when it is still humid it can be swallowed more easily.



*Fig. 5: Ritual stools (kpa) used during the initiation rite. The person to be initiated sits on it for several hours, during the consumption of the huge quantity of iboga. The kpa is peculiar to the Fang sect Ndea Narizanga.*

### **The Ingestion of iboga**

At noon, on the Thursday of the initiation week, the long phase of the iboga ingestion begins. It is the most delicate phase of the whole rite and the entire community experiences it with great anxiety. The novice is taken to a room in a village hut by the temple, and is made to sit on a stool, which is burdened with symbolic values. Some *kombo* move his/her body to set him/her in a particular position with round shoulders, the forearms rested on his/her legs, the hands hanging down.

This position cannot be modified for the whole time of the iboga ingestion. Each time the novice modifies the original position, even slightly, somebody set him/her in place again.

Also the look of the novice is kept fixed, by telling him/her to fix his/her eyes on a point on the ground. The *kombo* allowed me some time to choose the position of my head and the point to stare at, which were most comfortable for me. This

position, sitting on a stool, is used by the Ndea Narizanga sect and, perhaps by a few other Bwitist sects and it seems it is a recent innovation. In the "standard" position, used in most sects and spread from Dissumba Bwiti<sup>6</sup>, the novice sits on the ground, with stretched legs, the back kept in vertical position, forearms and hands rested on the thighs, staring at a point or an object placed in front of him/her.

In both positions the only allowed movement is: to turn one's head upwards at regular intervals, opening one's mouth to let a *kombo* introduce a spoon with a certain quantity of powdered iboga, close one's mouth and move one's head to the original position. Other allowed movement: swallowing iboga. The frequency of the introduction of the spoonfuls of iboga into the body of the novice, at the beginning is controlled by the *kombos*, however Bwitists think that frequently a certain degree of automatism progressively follows in taking iboga and it is the novice who makes the right movements on "his/her" own initiative, with a frequency which is considered optimal (and I must admit that I experienced it personally). During the very first moments of the iboga ingestion, the frequency may be of 8-9 swallowings per minute and it slows down more and more until it reaches one swallowing every 5-15 minutes. The frequency decrease is due above all to the gradual slowing down of all the physiological processes caused by iboga.

A group of persons, all the officiants (8 in my community) and some women, take turn around the novice. It is a kind of "team" "working" on him/her to accompany him/her with skill and care towards the moment of his/her "death-rebirth". Each of them carries out a specific task: one gives the iboga putting the spoon into the mouth of the novice; another one periodically checks his/her eyes and pupils, telling him/her to move them in the four directions; another one touches his/her body in successive stages and in different points to check the temperature and thus following the slow process of cooling down of the body caused by iboga. Every now and then the novice vomits and his/her vomits are picked up and kept separated on banana leaves and carefully examined. Each time I vomited, my *nana* (initiation mother) tasted a little vomit in order to understand how iboga was acting in my stomach. My vomits were a very important sign for the group, so important that they caused frequent discussions. The novice *must* vomit and if there is a delay or it does not happen at all, this causes a strong concern. Generally, it is thought that the lack of vomit is caused by the fact that the novice has concealed some serious sins during confession and for this reason he/she is urged to complete the confession. If the vomit takes too long, it may be decided to immediately stop the iboga ingestion and the whole initiation rite. It is one of the cases acknowledged by Bwitists in which there would be the risk of death for the novice.



Apart from particular cases, such as, in fact, the absence of the stimulus to vomit and for which the "less harm" rule is chosen, also the interruption of the iboga ingestion is considered dangerous. Once begun, this process cannot be interrupted by the novice on his/her own will: if he/she refuses to go on taking iboga because of difficulty or, more frequently, for fear of dying, the officiants urge him/her to go on and may even introduce iboga in his/her body by force. There are also cases of negative psychological reactions, true "bad trips" which are difficult to control and to "manage" for the officiants because of the great physical strength with which the novice is endowed in these moments.

Most of the problems that may arise during the *tobe si* are concentrated during the first hours of the iboga ingestion. As the ingestion goes on, the body of the novice progressively reaches an "icy stiffness" which does not allow him/her to move on his/her will and to have reactions of any kind. As already mentioned, the movements related to the iboga ingestion may become in some way "automatic", apparently independent of the will of the officiants and of the novice.

It has been reported that during the final stage of the iboga ingestion, often the novice has convulsions that require the prompt intervention of the *kombos* who block his/her body to prevent him/her from getting injured. During my initiation, however, I had no convulsions, which was positively accepted by the *kombos*.

The total quantity of iboga swallowed by the novice may range from 200 g to 500-600 g, and cases have been reported in which the quantity of 1,000 g has been reached (FERNANDEZ: 1982, 475). The quantity I swallowed probably exceeded 300 g.

Iboga has an anaesthetic effect that is soon felt on the palate. The taste is bitter—it is called "God's gall"—however, after a while, when the palate and the throat are well anaesthetised, the bitter taste is no longer felt. The long ingestion of iboga causes a progressive slowing down of the heartbeat and a slow cooling of the body, starting from the limbs. The first psychic effects occur 30-60 minutes after the beginning of the iboga ingestion and they become stronger and stronger, taking the novice towards more and more modified states of consciousness. The Bwistist then reported to me that in my case the iboga ingestion lasted 12 hours. During this time I experienced a strong "psychedelic trip", characterised by visual hallucinations and "revealing" deductive routes, and I achieved moments of true "illumination" (the contact with reality, that is the awareness of being in that situation, was getting weaker and weaker, until it was like a spot). Yet, the true "journey" was still to begin.

## **The great vision**

The novice is given iboga until the moment when he/she loses consciousness, in which the last glimmer of contact with reality fades away. The “team” of the officiants very cautiously follows the approaching of this moment. It is important to stop the iboga ingestion at the right moment, perhaps an “instant” before reaching the specific lethal dose for the novice. The high *kombo* is responsible for the quantity of iboga to be given and it is him who decides which is the last spoonful of iboga. He holds a thread in his hands, inserted in a needle and at intervals he pricks the body of the novice with the needle in different areas, thus checking its progressive loss of sensitivity. The loss of consciousness is checked by piercing some particular points of the body with the needle, at a certain depth. When he/she does no longer react, the high *kombo* gives the order to stop giving iboga.

The Bwitists of the Ndea Narizanga sect think that, at this point, in which the novice’s soul is completely separated from his/her body, the sound of a special musical instrument, the *mongongo*, is sufficient (and necessary) to urge it to “go out” and begin the journey to the other world. It is a single string bow, which is played by hitting the string with a stick, while the player’s oral cavity, kept near the string, acts as a sound box. The *mongongo* is played near the novice for a certain time.

Once ascertained the novice total loss of contact with reality, the officiants place his/her body on the ground, on a mat and keep it in a particular position. The body is watched over for the whole duration of the “great journey”. At intervals two old women move the body which tends to stiffen in the position in which it is, bending the arms and making the fingers, hands, wrists and neck’s articulations creak. Every now and then, during the day, the body is taken outside and is left for a while under the rays of the strong equatorial sun, so as to avoid excessive cooling. In fact the feeling of cold—not that of “feeling cold”, but that of “realising that it is cold”—pervades the whole initiation experience and in a way characterises also the “great vision”, even though it is majestically bright.

The moment in which the novice loses consciousness corresponds to a “leaving the body”; as far as I am concerned it was a typical OBE (Out of Body Experience). After a long “psychedelic trip”, which took place during the iboga ingestion, characterised by visual, sound and tactile hallucinations and by the appearance of paranormal phenomena such as the complete field vision (360°), I experienced the moment of the loss of consciousness “seeing” clearly “from above” my body, around which the officiants bustled about, while they moved it carefully from the stool and set it on the ground. I observed this scene farther and farther

from above, from a greater distance, until when, “looking up” I felt myself “swallowed up” by a vortex of light, a kind of luminous, very fast, almost instantaneous lift. From that moment, I had no more “hallucinations”, but a pure “vision”, whose memory is still well impressed on my mind. Bwitists maintain that the “great vision” is not forgotten for the rest of one’s life.

Going on with subjective remarks, the whole process seemed to me, when I was experiencing it, natural, almost “obvious”, though rather dangerous: through the ingestion of the strong dose of iboga—for which there is a specific lethal dose for each individual—the novice is really taken near the point of death since it is in that condition that he/she can “see the other world”, he/she can “pass into the other world”, beyond the death threshold. The mechanisms of separation of the “soul” from the body and its “coming back” caused through the ingestion of iboga have some characteristics in common with the subjective experiences called NDE (Near Death Experiences) and with going in and getting out the coma states caused by traumas or illnesses. There are many people who, awakening from coma, report to have been in wonderful, heavenly countries, in the “places of light”. In a subjective description of my experience, I would myself, too been inclined to describe the “places” of my “journey” as “the world of light”.

During the vision the novice receives a new name from the divine entities that contact him/her, from that moment this will be his/her initiation name (*nkombo*).

During the initiation journey of the novice, especially during the night, the members of the community perform numerous rites, accompanied by exhausting dancing, aiming at helping and facilitating the novice experience. During Friday, in front of the temple, a tree is erected, *otunga*, as the symbol of the placenta of the foetus-novice. Upon waking up, which corresponds to the birth in a new life according to the Bwitist creed, he/she, helped by the *kombos*, will have to “eradicate” the *otunga*, symbolising the braking of the umbilical cord and the new birth, and plant it again in a place in the forest, after having buried a small group of excretions and excrescences of his/her body (pieces of nails, hair locks, saliva, etc.).

### Awakening and final rites

The regaining of consciousness by the novice, usually expected on Saturday morning, is favoured—according to Bwitists directly brought about—by the sound of a second musical instrument, the sacred eight string harp, *ngombi*. The “going out” and “coming back” of the “soul” of the novice body take place—and in the Ndea Narizanga sect can only take place—through the sound of two instruments: *mon-*



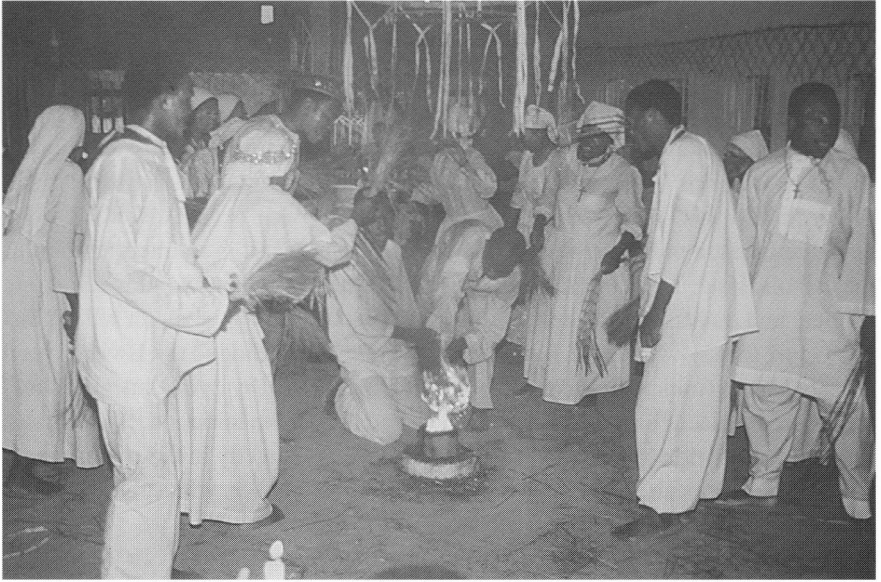


Fig. 6: A moment of a Bwistist night rite, with dances around the “fire-heart” of the temple.

*gongo* and *ngombi*. These two musical instruments are true sensorial “keys” carrying on opposite functions; they can never be played together, either in rites either during learning to use them (they are never played in profane situations, in which *iboga* is not used). Most of the Bwistist rites are organised based on the functional and symbolic polarity of these two instruments. The relationship between music and modified states of consciousness is here clearly evident, and not only in its symbolic aspect: its efficacy is subjectively experienced by each novice. My personal experience was to witness a case of “musical magic”.

In the Bwistist initiations there are frequently cases in which the novice does not “awake” at the expected moment, yet with a delay of some hours, rarely of a whole day, and ever more rarely of 24 hours or more. In these cases, the *ngombi* is played continuously near the novice ears so that his/her soul lost in the “other world”, can find the way back following the sonorous message backwards. A delay in the “awakening” of the novice is followed by the whole community with great concern. Although very rarely, still today cases occur in which the novice does not awaken and dies.

In my attempt to get information about what happens in these cases, in particular with regards to the Gabon legislation, I met with a strong resistance, my informants were unwilling to talk about it. As for the reasons leading to the death of a novice, I gathered some different and contradictory theses. Some informants maintain that the death of the novice is caused by an incomplete confession, during which serious sins are concealed such as homicide, anthropophagy or vampirism. According to this interpretation, the death of the novice is considered a totally negative event, a punishment and it is almost certain that it is an interpretation of the catholic kind. The interpretation offered by other informants would seem more original and traditional: the death of the novice is caused by the direct will of his/her "soul" to stay where it is, in the "other world". According to the Bwitist creed when a *bandzi* (initiated) arrives at the end of his/her life, by dying, his/her "soul" moves to the places of the "other world" visited during the initiation. Some times, during the initiation, the novice's soul decides to stay directly in the places where it would be destined to dwell anyway after his/her earthly life, with subsequent unconcern and abandonment of the physical body.

The "awakening" of the novice seems not to be instantaneous<sup>7</sup>. In the subjective interpretation I would be inclined to state that my five senses did not reawaken simultaneously, and that it took several hours for a complete recovery of the sensorial functions. The second last sense to awaken was the sight, the last one the tact. The tendency to stiffen of the limbs, particularly the lower limbs, lasted for 25-30 hours more from the moment of the "awakening", complicating and characterising the walking movements. During the reappearance of the sense of tact, the novice has a feeling of cold or, more precisely, of chill in the legs. In my case this reaction was welcomed by the officiants with joy and exultation as if it were a favourable and resolving signal, which in fact ended the state of apprehension which had accompanied the work of the officiants until that moment.

The "awakening" is followed by a long series of rites of thanks and propitiation for the "new born" person. Accompanied ("carried away") by the music of the harp, the novice goes over the path in the forest again, with due stops and ceremonies under each sacred tree. The baptism rite follows, during which the novice is made pass through a vagina shaped opening made in a vegetable trunk cut longitudinally, with its two sides kept tight outwards. The rite takes place at the centre of a watercourse, and then processions, dancing with the fire, ritual dressing-ups, within a wild scenic and musical choreography. During this phase also the big drums are played, which strengthen in this way the African tribal character that already pervades the whole initiation cycle. Personally, I experienced it as the hard-

est and most difficult phase to endure. The body, already exhausted by the long period of unconsciousness, undergoes more efforts and suffering.

The final act of the whole initiation rite is a private talk between the officiants and the novice, during which he/she tells what he/she saw during his/her vision, answering the numerous and detailed questions put to him/her. If the officiants think that the novice has "seen in the right way", he/she is at last proclaimed *bandzi*. A meal and a long and deep sleep will lead the new initiated person to his/her normal state of earthly existence (actually the effects of the initiation disappeared from my body and from my mind only a week later).

The main differences which I noticed between the initiation rite underwent by me and those described by other Authors related with other Fang Bwitist sects are: there is no purifying bath associated with confession; no drinking of emetic beverages; there is not the rite of the passage with the pirogue (*mbôngo*)<sup>8</sup>; unlike the other initiation rites, in which the entrance of the novice's soul into the other world is accompanied by the sound of the harp, in those of the Ndea Narizanga sect the harp is replaced in this function by the *mongongo*, whereas it plays a key role in the moment of the "awakening"; there is not the practice of injecting some drops of irritant liquid (*ebama*) into the novice eyes<sup>9</sup>.

In Bwiti only the officiants may shoulder the responsibility of giving *iboga* to other persons, to the *bandzi* and to those who want to become *bandzi* through *tobe si*. The Bwitist priest, in the framework of a rigid hierarchy, is the holder of the "Mysteries of *iboga*", by the Fangs, and this knowledge, unknown to the simple *bandzi*, is conveyed to the future officiants through long apprenticeships ending with higher level initiation moments. During these apprenticeships, the apprentice-officiant learns the mythological, liturgical and theological contents of the Bwiti religion and not only this. A part of the apprenticeship is focused on the study of the human body, on the reactions caused by *iboga* and on the interventions for each case. The dangerousness of *iboga* and the complexity of the initiation having been ascertained, the Bwitist officiants are prepared to deal with any negative reaction, "bad rip", or physiological obstacles. This part of the knowledge related to the "Mysteries of *iboga*" is characterised by a high degree of "scientificness". I could personally notice this during my initiation: checking the colour of my urine and the frequency of my urinations, periodically checking the degree of mydriasis of my eyes, carefully examining my vomits and tasting them, all this demonstrate a fairly good "scientific" methodology. On the other hand, the Fangs, even before choosing the religion of *iboga*, were already well-known for the curious funeral rites,



during which the autopsy of the body was performed (RAPONDA-WALKER & SIL-LANS, 1962:115-121) and this prepared them to the study of the human body.

Still today, in most of the Bwist sects and communities, the transfer of the knowledge concerning the "Mysteries of iboga" takes place orally. Since a few years, in some communities of Libreville or of its surroundings, the first timid attempts of written transmission of the Bwist knowledge can be noticed through the drawing up of Bwist "catechisms" and of "vade-mecum" for the Bwist priest.

At present Gabon is the most "open" State in the world with respect to the use of a strong entheogenic substance. The use is not limited to a particular ethnic group, it is allowed for everybody who sincerely wishes to have this experience, joining a Bwist community. However the initiation to Bwiti is hard. It is a question of courage and of will to go and "see" and also to be willing to risk a lot to go and "see". I had the courage and the will to go and "see" and also for this—notwithstanding the over 500 punctures of the most different tropical insects, of the burns intentionally inflicted to my body during the dancing with fire, or the five kilograms of weight lost during the rite—it was one of the most fascinating and constructive experiences in my life. The reader will understand if I take the liberty of stating that I am proud of being a *bandzi*, "the one who has already eaten", a "living dead person".

## Notes

- 1 At kilometre 11 on the road to Ntoun.
- 2 See my previous works reported in the bibliography.
- 3 The *popé na popé* or *popé* is a liturgical language of Bwiti of the Apindijii, the Mitsogho and some Fang sects such as Dissumba and Yembawé. At present, in the other Fang sects—among which the Ndea Nadizanga sect—the *popé* has been neglected and replaced by a Fang language: only some liturgical terms such as the one that indicates the initiation rites are still in *popé*.
- 4 In the Bwist hierarchy the *bandzi* is the first degree; the *nimba*, the *kombos* and the *Bwiti kombo* follow.
- 5 Near Bizango, at Kilometre 14 of the same road Libreville-Ntoun.
- 6 "Dissumba" means "the origin".
- 7 It does not seem so since in this connection I have only data of my personal experience.
- 8 In the other Bwist sects, after the confession, the novice is accompanied near a brook. Here an officiant pulls a leaf off the tree *ekô*, put some resin drops on it and then sets fire to it and lets it flow on the running water of the brook, making it pass through the novice's legs which are wide apart. It is thought that the piroga-leaf (*mbôngo*), passing through the body of the novice, takes away the sins he/she has confessed (MARY, 1983:232).
- 9 The *ebama* is a liquid extracted from some plants, used in initiation rites in different traditional and syncretic cults in Gabon. The introduction of some drops of *ebama* into the eyes of the novice causes an immediate burning sensation. Once the painful sensation passed, the novice, looking

directly at the sun gets a vision (cf., for example, RAPONDA-WALKER & SILLANS, 1962:53, GOLLNHOFFER & SILLANS, 1979:745; SAMORINI, 1996).

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